
Generation War (Unsere Mutter, Unsere Väter)

Le focus générationnel : Generation War

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GENERATION WAR (UNSERE MUTTER, UNSERE VÄTER)

MINISERIES *Generation War* is a German series on the Second World War, Nazism, and terror – but one that stands out because of its particular focus. Indeed, the five protagonists are not leading figures of the Reich, but ordinary people who embody the different attitudes German citizens took under Nazi rule. Therefore, they foreshadow the imminent disaster.

The series *Generation War* portrays five friends living at the heart of Nazi Germany, in Berlin during the 1940s. The group is comprised of Viktor, a Jew whose father was considered the most famous tailor of the city before the events of the Night of Broken Glass; Greta, a diva who is more preoccupied with her own personal glory than that of her country (which, from the start, presages the tragic fate that awaits her); Charlotte, a somewhat naive young woman who sees in the model of the German woman upheld by the Nazis (devoted, loyal, we encounter here the sacrificial rhetoric of totalitarianism) an ideal to attain; Wilhelm and Fridelm, two brothers, one is already a non-commissioned officer, the other does not yet know the ropes of the horrors at the front and is rather reluctant to the ambient exaltation.

The series hopes to present a picture of German society through these five protagonists, to portray characters who are various expressions of the same idea, the concept of German citizens under the Third Reich (without excluding Jews yet). However this phenomenon, which falls under a certain standardization, also presents its opposite, in other words an aim toward dramatization. Though each protagonist presents a different facet of what the values and aspirations of an average German could have been, they each also assert a bold individuality. The series delves into individual stories, completely unique and even at times excep-

tional, which occasionally detracts from their universal scope. The pure and unapologetic fiction takes precedence over the desire of reconstitution.

These two approaches, *a priori* contradictory, are in fact completely dependent on each other. We shall now seek to describe the originality of *Generation War* which is based on a very interesting attempt to think about the Nazi phenomenon.

The series begins in 1941. Hitler's access to power as well as his progressive grip on the entire society is therefore not included. We are immediately plunged into an ideologized Germany, at the dawn of massive deportations which destroyed the Jewish community. The series is far from giving way to an easy demagoguery which would consist in presenting all Germans as awful fanatics. It does show however the unfaltering power of seduction Nazi doctrine held over them, a seduction which discreetly yet deeply contaminated the youth, to the point of helping to understand how such atrocities were committed. The malevolent idea, ceaselessly repeated and having disguised itself in its finest apparel, finally manages to gain the minds of the most idealist and innocent youth to germinate the darkest of flowers, as a Trojan horse having traversed without trouble the outer wall and stands ready to unleash its vile flood of criminal and destructive thoughts. Each character is not receptive to this in the same way. This once again shows the authors' desire



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“We were five friends, we were young and we were convinced that the future belonged to us. The entire world laid at our feet, all we needed to do was to attack, we were immortal.”

to present a picture with nuances. It corresponds to a logic of standardization, a logic which is supposed to make us understand that the panel of characters before us can, to a lesser or greater scale, represent all of German society, in an inductive scientific perspective. This logic will be jeopardized more than once by dramatization methods, as mentioned earlier.

Once one identifies the seduction exerted by Nazi ideology, faint yet real nevertheless, we can explain and understand how it functions, thanks to the psychological hints present throughout the series.

An essential symbol of *Generation War* lies in the initial photograph, the one of the five friends taken while they were together in Berlin before they parted ways, and which they each hold on to a copy. This photograph is a way, during the war they had at first imagined would be extremely short, of remembering their past happiness and, especially, of dreaming their future, of the time they would all once again be reunited. The voice-off, carried by Wilhelm, the oldest of the group, has more the value of a commentary (outside of the action) than a real narrative function. However, while the self-timer of the camera inexorably moves and the picture of the five protagonists is already nearly printed in the indelible substance that makes up the film, Wilhelm says, in a detached tone, yet in which a touch of irony can be detected, a sentence which in itself sums up the extent the seductive illusions of Nazism holds over the characters: “We were five friends, we were young and we were convinced that the future belonged to us. The entire world laid at our feet, all we needed to do was to attack, we were immortal.”

This fantasy of immortality, relatively common otherwise, is the bridgehead by which the ideology melts into the romanticism of the youth in order to ...



- better flatter it. It is revived each time by this photo which pauses for a few moments on screen, thus indicating, in a didactic manner, how important it is.

This symbol, quite simplistic in appearance – as there are so many theories on images as the testimonies of a subsistence of being beyond its carnal envelop – becomes progressively more important in its later appearances, during which it is nearly always altered, or reworked. It thus acquires a material dimension, palpable and we can, throughout the narrative, feel that death gangrenes the photographic substance which was initially presented as inalterable.

When Greta seeks to obtain false papers for Viktor, her lover, so that he may flee Germany, she is forced to cut out her partner's face from the original photograph. The destruction of the picture is thus a prelude to physical extermination. This destruction is all the more terrible as it is involuntary. Greta thinks she is really saving her friend, whereas he will nevertheless be handed over to the Nazis. For the first time, this symbol reveals the characters' vulnerability, it announces, through a very meaningful metaphor (the empty space

where Viktor's face used to be), the tragedies to come.

During the second episode, Charlotte learns from Fridelm of his brother's death, whom she secretly is in love with (Wilhelm in fact survived, though no one knows it yet). Feeling hopeless, she bursts into tears looking at the photograph which is shot as a close-up. However we do not see Wilhelm's smiling face, we only observe Charlotte, whose happy expression creates a brutal contrast with her present distress. Wilhelm is simply erased, but there is no empty space, only a troubling off-camera which we suspect is loaded with meaning.

This recurring symbol, which is progressively deconstructed with every appearance, gradually develops a sense of irony. The fixed smiles of the characters, a testimony of their senseless beliefs, seem to mock their own credulity. Their progressive awareness of an impassable and brutal mortality is expressed visually, which no picture will ever be able to pretend to avert. The Dionysiac, liberating and inventive aspect of juvenile reverie is in fact constrained to a codified and structured form, as the State has taken hold over the

imagination and individual hopes pretending to incorporate them into a collective national logic. Indeed, the youth has let itself be brigaded by thinking they saw an entire country celebrate its energy and creative vitality.

The three episodes each tackle a different stage of the conflict, in other words, a separation, a disillusion. Indeed, the blissful idealism of the beginning gives way to doubt, the solidarity and collective enthusiasm to isolation and solitude. The triptych concludes with a nihilist plunge into the heart of the absurdity of war. The glorification of sacrificial acts takes precedence over military logic. Wilhelm and his men are for example summoned to take control of part of a street which apparently holds a strategic objective. Around them, the German army, in full flight, retreats every day a bit farther, but the orders are formal and the unit must uselessly fight until its downfall. Fridelm manages with another soldier to penetrate into the building aimed for the attack and realizes that it in fact is merely storing completely futile things, old objects, broken and eaten away by mould, heaps of paper strewn across the floor. The men are definitely abandoned to their own fate. Military hierarchy, German supremacy, and even the all-powerful figure of the “Führer” are merely old woolly ideas. Only the here and now subsists, an illusory struggle for survival.

At the same time as the fantasy of a millenary Third Reich crumbles, the doors of Hell also open to the characters and they become aware not only of their finitude but also of their damnation. As they say themselves, no one recognizes anymore the titles of hero they previously proudly carried, but everyone sees in them mere vulgar killers in the pay of a criminal State.

We are originally only confronted to the German question, however it becomes clear that the moral collapse has spread across Europe at the dawn of Germany’s inevitable defeat (Polish partisans unhealthily anti-Semitic, SS Ukrainians). Even Wilhelm, abandoning the nobility and assurance conferred by the war, confesses the crimes his unit committed, and more generally those of the entire army. The aristocratic war

pride he exemplifies during the series is tainted with a sense of ridicule before the atrocities for which the Nazis are responsible. Viktor, who has returned from Poland after having lived every horror imaginable, goes to the Allied information services in an attempt to uncover what happened to Greta (whom he did not find at her home and whom, in fact, was shot a few days before the armistice). He discovers the Gestapo officer responsible for his arrest, who now appears to be an honest civil servant. Fridelm, accompanied by a few Germans barely twelve or thirteen years of age, is attacked by Russian soldiers: he chooses to be a martyr so that his soldiers may accept to surrender. As to Charlotte, after having been captured by the Rus-

sians, she is sent to Berlin and there is reunited with Wilhelm and Viktor, in the same bar where they had celebrated their departure (at moments like this we emphatically sense that the script writing is outrageously artificial, as is often the case in television fiction). The series concludes with a still image of the photograph of the five friends, with their dates of

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birth and of death scrolling on screen. This reveals a deliberate choice to make individuality as well as the viewer’s attachment to the characters take precedence over the historical narrative. The picture of Berlin in ruins could have been a satisfying conclusion, though this would have had a completely different impact. In the epilogue, we find the answer to the question asked earlier regarding the difficult balance between the standardization of the characters and dramatization. If an identification with the protagonists, requiring the expression of strong and remarkable characters, is important, this is perhaps because it alone allows the public to go beyond the moral barrier (the barrier of a form of complicity with the Nazi agents), in order to take an interest in the social question of understanding what it meant *to be German* under the Third Reich. ■

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